

I Zofia Małgorzata Płomińska

(23 January 1937 – 9 June 2011)

Małgorzata Płomińska (she never used the name Zofia) was a pillar of the National Museum in Warsaw. Over the years, she lent her many exceptional talents to this institution. Née Idzikowska, she was a daughter of a Warsaw architect. She was not only excellently educated, fluent in French and English, elegant and charming, but also well-organized, so that every project entrusted to her was a guaranteed success. This is why everyone, senior colleagues and contemporaries and later also subordinates, enjoyed working with her.

She studied French and the history of art at the University of Warsaw, obtaining her MA in 1958. After a year-long practicum in Łazienki Palace, at the time a division of the National Museum in Warsaw, in 1961 Małgorzata Płomińska was hired to work in the secretariat of the museum's director, Professor Stanisław Lorentz. His activities reached far beyond the normal occupations of a museum director: he was at once an active Professor at the University of Warsaw, a politician, a Sejm deputy, a member of the Polish Academy of Sciences and of numerous academies, councils and committees, Poland's representative to international organizations and an untiring proponent of rebuilding the Royal Castle in Warsaw. Hence, his secretariat was also an extraordinary place. Mingling in it were students, petitioners and other museum directors freshly arrived in Warsaw, as ambassadors waited on the phone, requests flowed in from the whole world and complex projects awaited completion. Małgorzata Płomińska served as the professor's spokesperson and lead on many projects, secretary and academic assistant, typist, editor and researcher. Her tact, efficiency and great sense of humour made her a dream colleague.¹ She wrote about this phase of her career and about her unique director in *Księga Pamiątkowa ku czci Profesora Stanisława Lorentza w setną rocznicę urodzin*.² She interrupted her work at the museum to accompany her husband, Marek Płomiński, to Africa, where he was engaged for an international contract.

After their return to Poland in 1971, she was given a very important new task: she was appointed curator of the museum's Education Centre. Professor Lorentz appreciated fully the role of education through museums and wanted to abandon the routine of leading groups through the museum by launching a more creative and active interaction with the public, especially with the young. Małgorzata Płomińska successfully transformed the ordinary guide office into a modern research and education department, with a professional staff, a programme of lectures both inside and outside the museum, meetings in galleries and an active young people's museum fan club.³ This department acquired such a strong position that when the idea surfaced in 1976 to organize an Artistic Olympiad for secondary-school pupils,

¹ In response to Professor Lorentz's request, Małgorzata Płomińska edited and published articles including "Wystawy w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie 1964–1974" [Exhibitions at the National Museum in Warsaw, 1964–1974], *Muzealnictwo*, vol. 23 (1975), pp. 8–20.

² Małgorzata Płomińska, "Widziane z sekretariatu" [A view from the secretariat], *Przeszłość przyszłości... Księga Pamiątkowa ku czci Profesora Stanisława Lorentza w setną rocznicę urodzin* [To the future from the past: A memorial volume for Professor Stanisław Lorentz on the 100th anniversary of his birth] (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, Zamek Królewski w Warszawie, 1999), pp. 281–9.

³ In this period, her publications included "Coup d'œil sur les activités spéciales en Pologne," *Museum*, vol. 33, n° 3 (1981), pp. 183–4, and "Współczesne muzeum – centrum upowszechniania sztuki?" [The contemporary museum: A centre for popularizing art?], *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, vol. 14 (1984), pp. 337–40.

Professor Lorentz appointed Płomińska manager of the Organizing Office of the National Artistic Olympiad at the National Museum in Warsaw. This office supervised the organization of two Olympiads in two fields with separate committees, the Music Olympiad at the Musical Academy in Warsaw and the Artistic Olympiad at the museum. From then on, the Olympiads took over every spring, as the office busied itself with writing the tests, preparing essay topics, checking and marking the essays, advancing students to subsequent rounds, not to mention taking care of dozens of children coming from all over Poland, who needed not only places to stay and eat, but also a programme of other activities in Warsaw to include tours of the city and its relics, museums, concerts and plays. These unforgettable impressions for many teenagers from small localities often turned out to be more important than the test itself. Małgorzata Płomińska knew how to make sure that these meetings would be exceptional, making the young competitors and their teachers and guardians, as well as the jurors, join in a common enterprise. For seventeen years, until 1993, they were guided by a single, eternally friendly and forever capable person.

Professor Jan Białostocki, the editor of the *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie*, also appreciated Małgorzata Płomińska's exceptional talents, entrusting her in 1974 with the role of managing editor of his publication. Today, it is difficult to imagine the difficulties of publishing this quarterly then. Paper shortages and printers' work loads made publishing regularly impossible, and forcing through barely legible illustrations bordered on the miraculous, as translators were amateurs, authors behind on their deadlines, photographs unattainable, microscopic multilingual captions illegible – yet Płomińska faced these enormous obstacles with iron consistency, producing issue after issue. Writing for the *Bulletin* were her museum colleagues, experts on European art from across Poland and from abroad and, increasingly, historians of Polish art, as Professor Białostocki discovered that this, too, could be interesting to foreign readers. The articles appeared in foreign languages, at first mostly in French as the bulletin's title indicated, and later mostly in English or, depending on their subject or the author's interests or origin, in other languages. For many years, the *Bulletin* was an important channel of communication between Polish art historians and the Western world, as the most important museums in the world received it by subscription or in subscription exchanges. After Professor Białostocki's death in 1988, as new editors guided the *Bulletin*, it was Małgorzata Płomińska, until her retirement in 1999, who guaranteed that it would appear.

With her health deteriorating, Płomińska was forced to give up the exhausting job of curator of the Education Centre. In June 1990 she was appointed curator of the Miniature Collection within the Gallery of Polish Art, and here, too, turned out to be exceptionally efficient and creative. Being introduced to new issues, she very quickly acquainted herself with the collection and selected nearly 400 European miniatures, including Polish ones, for permanent exhibition in the Gallery of Polish Art of the National Museum in Warsaw, the first permanent exhibition of miniatures in this museum, and probably the only one in Poland to this day. She published a guide to the miniatures room,⁴ as well as a chapter in the museum guide.⁵

⁴ Płomińska, *Gabinet Miniatur: przewodnik* [The Miniature Painting Room: A guide] (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 1999).

⁵ Płomińska, "Polish Art Collection. Miniature Painting," in *National Museum in Warsaw. Guide. Galleries and Study Collections*, Dorota Folga-Januszewska, Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, eds (Warsaw: National Museum in Warsaw, 2006), pp. 212–3.

Małgorzata Płomińska's whole professional life serves as a model of selfless work for the values deposited in the museum. She was a deliberate spokesperson of the living, open and visitor-friendly museum. She allowed the needs of this institution, in which she believed and to which she had donated all her talents, to guide her choices and decisions.

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